

Understanding imperialism in the 21st century

The problematic legacy of Lenin

John Willoughby

KARL KAUTSKY WAS RIGHT. The general term “imperialism” describes a set of policies and practices which facilitate the domination of one political entity over another. The more specific term “capitalist imperialism” does not denote a stage of capitalism, but rather policies designed by more powerful political entities to facilitate the expansion of capital over societies which resist the creation of capitalist social relations themselves or the domination of non-national capital over its economic life. Thus, a Marxist explanation of specific capitalist imperial actions or the more general tendency of capitalist nation-states to develop imperial foreign policies must focus on the connection between expansive accumulation and the consolidation of a *politics* of imperial domination.¹

This conclusion does not mean that Kautsky made correct political judgments about how to confront German participation in World War I. Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, he temporized and waffled. His opposition to the war was muted and ineffective, as he attempted to have his cake and eat it — to remain a loyal member of the increasingly imperialist SPD and oppose the German war effort. However, this failure of political will does not mean his understanding of imperialism was also flawed. After all, Rosa Luxemburg also thought imperialism and militarism constituted a set of policies necessary to facilitate capitalist expansion and territorial domination. She did not identify imperialism with a particular stage of capitalism.

This conclusion also does not mean that Lenin’s theory of imperialism made no significant contributions to our understanding of imperialism today. Indeed, I would agree with Callinicos that — despite his unsuccessful attempts to synthesize the theoretical frameworks of Hilferding, who from a German perspective emphasized the creation of national capitalist blocs under the control of finance capital, and Hobson, who from an English perspective focused on the linkages among economic inequality, insufficient aggregate demand and capital export — Lenin’s stress on the destabilizing effects of uneven development and his understanding of the potentially disruptive impact of anti-colonial liberation movements remain fundamental to our understanding of contemporary imperialism.² In addition, Lenin’s insistent claim that imperialist rivalry and war was a fundamental characteristic of the early-20th century capitalist disorder certainly is more prescient than Kautsky’s argument that a unified form of ultra-imperialism could emerge from the ashes of World War I.

Still, Lenin’s identification of imperialism with a stage of capitalism is a rhetorical device that has created considerable theoretical confusion. This formulation has led legions of Marxist analysts to attempt to identify a particular economic law or tendency with a particular set of political practices without considering all the mediating factors which can generate different policy interventions.

That capitalism is an expansive, dynamic economic system is a finding that nearly all students of contemporary life would agree. Capitalist firms search for cheaper sources of productive labor power, cheaper raw materials, new markets, new locations for production, and new technological interventions in production and distribution. Finance capital follows to provide the necessary credit to facilitate the growth and reorganization of enterprises — the concentration and centralization of capital. These processes have an inherent spatial dimension. As Trotsky pointed out in a just-republished *Foreign Affairs* article written in the 1930s, capitalism is always trying to escape from the bonds of nationality and the nation-state.⁴ These tendencies do not rest on a particular stage of capitalism. Nor is expansion created by a particular economic crisis or contradiction. Capitalism would grow into new territories even if there were no tendency for the rate of profit to fall, disproportionality disruptions, nor insufficient aggregate demand. What drives this expansion is the constant search for economic rents or above-average profits — the restless search for ever-more surplus value. I have never been convinced, as an economist, that different stages of capitalism (competitive, monopoly, financialized) have significantly moderated this tendency.

This does not mean, however, that capital expansion is always the same. Here, Lenin’s insight that there was something different about global capitalist conflict in the early 20th century than during the 19th century is important. A new type of imperialism had emerged when Lenin wrote *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* [1916], but not for the reasons which he articulated. This argument can be made more clearly if we first consider more generally the opportunities and barriers which confront the capital expansion project. The problem facing capitalist firms is that such expansion seldom takes place without social resistance. The use of extra-economic coercive force — either implicit or explicit — is central to the accumulation project. Capital expansion never takes place in a pure economic sphere.

To understand the different forms capitalist imperialism takes, it is useful to consider six factors that focus on different ways to analyze the spatial / political implications of changes in the forces of production and evolving social relations. Where possible, I will indicate how these factors affect the practices of capitalist imperialism today.

First, the way in which capital expansion takes place is conditioned by changes in the technological capabilities of firms and their state supporters.

Contemporary economic globalization [the intensified movement across national borders of commodities, capital, and labor power] is driven by enormous advances in the technologies of transportation, communication, and monitoring. A further factor which is less often stressed is that this process has led to the unprecedented spread of technological knowledge, which makes it possible for integrated global systems of capitalist production and distribution to emerge and strengthen. When Lenin was writing, the ability of the export of capital to organize the extraction of raw materials and open up new markets was just beginning to intensify, and this process often had clear national dimensions, i.e., one could identify particular loans or specific investment projects with German, French, or British capital.

Second, the nature of the state and related class relations of societies confronting the import of capital have a profound effect on how imperial domination does or does not take place. The people within so-called peripheral social formations have agency. Marx once argued that British colonial rule would create a form of Indian capitalism which would eventually confront and overthrow British imperialism. His specific focus on the spread of technological capabilities through the railroad industry was not correct.⁵ In fact, India did not experience significant capitalist development during the Raj. On the other hand, British rule did create a small class of Western-educated professionals who had an outsized impact in mobilizing populations against British colonialism. This process was repeated globally in different ways throughout the world. Lenin himself came from this new class stratum. The rise of anti-colonial nationalism has meant that the direct rule over “peripheral” territories is not available for any rational form of imperial control today.⁶ When Lenin was writing, colonial control was still a powerful option for imperial countries. Nevertheless, he stressed that the struggle for national liberation and anti-capitalist resistance could be linked.

Third, changes in the relations of rival capitalist blocs can reorganize imperialist politics. Note that alliances among capitalist enterprises need not be defined nationally, although Lenin stressed the issue of uneven development of national capitalist blocs in his analysis of the fundamental causes of World War I. His focus on the rise of German finance capital hemmed in by other more stagnant imperial / colonial powers has laid the basis for many premature mainstream and Marxist arguments that the era of American hegemony will soon end. In the 70s, it was the rise of Europe and Japan which would destabilize American power. Now, the focus is on the rise of China in particular and East Asia in general. I will return to this issue shortly, but I would note here that many analyses of contemporary imperialism fail to acknowledge the extraordinary technological dynamism of global capitalism. It is as if the relatively slower growth of European and American capitalism defines the nature of global capitalism, when in fact there have been enormous surges in global production. This leads many to assert incorrectly that the relative decline of the U.S. economy is synonymous with the relative decline of U.S. capitalism.

Fourth, the nature of institutions governing inter-state relations have an important effect on forms of imperialism. Organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank matter. In the postwar years, U.S. foreign-policy elites have fitfully attempted to create global institutions, which can use their authority (derived from the most powerful national governments) to regulate trade disputes and keep barriers to commodity trade and capital movements low, intensify the integration of countries facing debt crises into the networks of global capitalist control, and present capitalist development as the only path available for the improvement of living standards of the world’s peoples. As we noted earlier, Lenin did not anticipate this possibility, and given his political agenda, that is understandable. Still, this gap does not require us to ignore the rise of multilateral institutions in the contemporary era.

Fifth, changes in the power and distribution of the means of military coercion have an important effect on facilitating or limiting imperial conflict. Breakthroughs in command-and-control technology within the most advanced military organizations have, in one way, made it easier for imperial planners to contemplate military interventions to discipline outlier or renegade states. On the other hand, one noteworthy development in the last several decades is the migration of nuclear weapons and delivery systems to quite poor states such as North Korea or Pakistan. This suggests that the exercise of military power by advanced capitalist states has its limits. Moreover, because of the inability to establish stable colonial rule that I referred to earlier in this essay, the American debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate that the possession of overwhelming military force cannot ensure the ability of an imperial power to establish effective political control over a rebellious territory. Lenin had surprisingly little to say about how changes in military technology might affect shifts in imperial policies.

Sixth, the nature of the relation of the metropolitan working and professional-managerial classes to the imperialist projects of “their” nation-states are crucial for the understanding of the sustainability of imperialist politics. This last factor addresses the problematic creation of a hegemonic imperial culture. In recent years, we have witnessed a peculiar phenomenon in the politics of the United States and Western Europe

— the rejection by the Right of the neoliberal order of multilateral capitalist expansion and the rhetorical promotion of a xenophobic, national capitalist society as an alternative. In the United States, Donald Trump’s eagerness to withdraw from NATO, disrupt U.S.–EU relations, and perhaps dismantle some foreign military bases reflects a popular rejection by many within the United States of the usefulness of the post-World War II imperial institutions. Before his disastrous foray into Ukraine, Vladimir Putin recognized the shakiness of popular support for these neoliberal political alliances and formed, at very little cost, important linkages with the new Right-wing parties of Europe. Lenin’s focus in his writings was on how the working class in advanced capitalist territories became attached to or seduced by imperial exploitation. He identified an aristocracy of labor which shared in the imperial loot. While many have not found this argument convincing, Lenin’s consideration of the problem of working-class attachment to the colonial policies of the day is important and should remain an important issue for any student of imperialism today.

These six points help us identify the contradictions which face any imperial or would-be imperial power. Because of their complexity, there is always a high degree of uncertainty about the global environment in which governing elites and capitalists operate, and this uncertainty often leads to catastrophic mistakes which undermine particular imperialist policies. Although Lenin thought of World War I as an inevitable outcome of imperial rivalry, for example, most historians view it as arising from a series of devastating miscalculations. Similarly, it is hard to argue that Bush’s decision to create a neo-colonial outpost in Iraq was anything but a hubristic, neocon fever-dream, even if it was motivated by a desire to seize control of Iraqi oil fields. The Iraq War temporarily eroded American power abroad and shook the hegemonic support of imperial policies within the United States. I would argue that while the exercise of imperial coercion in contemporary capitalism is inevitable, few specific policies spring unproblematically from the logic of accumulation.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine illustrates some of these findings. He underestimated the cost of the Russian invasion by failing to recognize that it would be extremely difficult to establish semi-colonial control over a territory which was attempting to integrate itself economically, militarily, and culturally with Western Europe (with the support of EU and U.S. elites). It is likely that, while the Ukrainian people will suffer and Russian regional imperial ambitions will weaken, the U.S. alliance system will strengthen. It is as if Putin handed the Biden Administration a geo-strategic gift. For the anti-imperialist Left in the United States, the dilemma is clear: while the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be resisted, we should also oppose the expansion of NATO and the further intensification of U.S. militarism.

Some recent commentaries have focused on four important issues raised by the Leninist analysis of imperialism. Phil Gasper’s analysis stresses the importance of focusing on Lenin and Bukharin’s emphasis on uneven development and imperialist rivalry.⁷ Certainly, there is a fierce competitive struggle among capitalist enterprises, and nation-states often act to defend the interests of “their” capitalists. The rapid rise of one set of national enterprises, however, need not automatically signal a decline in the power of a nation-state whose economy is growing less rapidly. Within the advanced capitalist world, growth has taken place in an institutional framework that depends on the exercise of U.S. power. It is not likely that the leaders of capitalist Japan, South Korea, or Germany have any reason to challenge these hegemonic structures and practices. Indeed, during the Trump era, the political leaders of these countries pleaded with the U.S. government to remain their imperial sponsor.

On the other hand, rivalry between a stagnating United States and a rising China or recalcitrant Russia could destabilize the world order, even though Chinese and Russian capital accumulation depends on operating with the structures of U.S.-sponsored globalization. As I noted previously, any prognosis about imperial rivalry must confront the fact that we do not know what the future will bring. Will Xi’s economic policies lead to a weakening in Chinese capital accumulation? Will Biden’s attempts to construct Asian opposition to China and reassert American dominance in the region last beyond his term in office? Will the U.S. and China (with the support of business interests on both sides of the divide) attempt to revitalize the interpenetration of U.S. and Chinese capital? Simply asserting the predominance of imperialist rivalry does not allow us to answer these specific questions.

The discussion of Johnny Mercer, Chernoh Bah, and Sunit Singh raises a different issue: the status of the traditional Leninist promotion of colonial, national-liberation movements.⁸ In their different ways, these commentators argue that the celebration of the creation of anti-colonial capitalist states in the “periphery” deemphasizes the importance of class struggle within these social formations and downplay the ways in which the integration of relatively new capitalist social formations into a global capitalist system forms alliances of different national ruling classes. If Lenin were alive today, he would probably agree with these perceptive commentaries even though the traditional Stalinist interpretation of *Imperialism* often stresses that anti-imperialist or anti-colonial struggles are more salient than anti-capitalist struggles. Lenin’s own political practice suggests that he always strived to link such nationalist movements to the working-class struggle for socialism.

Finally, there is Bill Martin’s recognition that Donald Trump’s intervention into imperial politics often represented a break with the postwar imperial consensus.⁹ This, to me, suggests that the cultural hegemony of U.S. imperialist politics rests on shakier grounds than normal. Trump is evoking a type of imperialism that rests solely on American military power rather than on the creation of multilateral institutions. This vision is not unique to Trump,

and indeed, it was an important part of Right-wing Republican politics in the immediate postwar era. We should be under no illusions that Trump’s intervention is progressive. At the same time, my guess is that if Trump had withdrawn from NATO, scuppered the WTO, and closed down military bases in South Korea or Germany, this would have weakened the ability of the U.S. state to project its coercive power. Unfortunately, no one on the social-democratic Left, including Bernie Sanders, has attempted to articulate an anti-imperialist alternative to the Biden Administration’s attempt to reconstruct the institutional framework of U.S. hegemony.

The struggle for imperial control over resources, markets, and politics has been enormously destructive. Tens of millions have perished in wars, human-manufactured famines, and coercive attempts to crush popular rebellions. Military rivalry and the continued development of ever-more dangerous weapons systems threaten humanity itself. Lenin’s insistence that capitalism and imperialism are ineluctably linked is compelling, but his theory has limited explanatory power and gives us inadequate political guidance. An alternative perspective insists that there are different types of imperialist policies — some more dangerous than others — and it is not useful to limit ourselves to a sectarian insistence that a specific campaign with anti-imperialist implications (such as the banning of nuclear weapons or the arms trade) must always be linked to the struggle for socialism. There are always liberating possibilities between the oppressive imperialist capitalist present and the socialist future. Anti-imperialist socialists should be radical reformists and revolutionaries at the same time.

This final conclusion places itself in opposition to the analysis of Chris Cutrone, whose critique of Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch in the *Platypus Review* raises a series of issues related to the nature of the capitalist state and the role of reformist politics in the construction of socialism.¹⁰ Cutrone argues that socialist strategy which focuses on reforming the practices of the nation-state represents a form of liberalism and betrays the struggle for socialism. He draws a link between this alleged pallid reformism and Stalin’s claim that socialism can be constructed in one country.

This intervention relates to Lenin’s theory of imperialism because Lenin too thought that the campaign against imperialism is synonymous with revolutionary action to smash the capitalist state. Cutrone draws heavily on Lenin’s *State and Revolution* to articulate his argument, without noting that this allegedly most libertarian of Lenin’s works simultaneously celebrates the proletariat’s ability to run society without an oppressive state and calls for strict factory discipline and technocratic rule. Cutrone makes the extraordinary claim that it does not matter for the construction of socialism what the working class does as long as the working class is doing it. I suspect that Cutrone’s definition of the working class is flexible enough so that any anti-socialist actions of workers are not considered working-class actions.

Unlike Cutrone, I believe Panitch’s and Miliband’s critique of mainstream social democratic politics is important. They both stress the necessity to link campaigns for changes in socio-economic policies within the state with the construction of a revived working-class culture that centers on socialist political activism outside the state. It is hard to imagine an effective socialist and anti-imperialist politics which does not focus on the institutions and practices of the nation-state. Panitch and his co-author Sam Gindin recognized this when they wrote *The Making of Global Capitalism*.¹¹ While it lacks the revolutionary passion of Lenin’s *Imperialism*, it provides a far better analysis of contemporary imperialism and the role of the U.S. imperialist state than Lenin’s early-20th century writings. This last point is not a criticism of Lenin. After all, he wrote on imperialism more than a century ago. **IP**

¹ The classic Marxist writings I will be drawing on in this essay include: V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970); Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973); John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954); Karl Kautsky, “National State, Imperialist State, and Confederation,” in *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I*, eds. Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

² Alex Callinicos, “Lenin and Imperialism,” in *The Palgrave Handbook on Leninist Political Philosophy* (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018), 457–82.

³ I make this point most forcefully in John Willoughby, “Evaluating the Leninist Theory of Imperialism,” *Science and Society* 59, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 320–38.

⁴ Leon Trotsky, “Nationalism and Economic Life,” *Foreign Affairs* (April 1934), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/xx/nationalism.htm>.

⁵ Karl Marx, “The Future of British Rule in India,” in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 12: Marx and Engels: 1853–1854* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 257.

⁶ One important exception to this conclusion is the settler-colonial occupation of Palestine by the Israeli state.

⁷ Phil Gasper, “Lenin and Bukharin on Imperialism,” *International Socialist Review* 100 (Spring 2016), available online at <https://isreview.org/issue/100/lenin-and-bukharin-imperialism/index.html>.

⁸ Chernoh Bah, Bill Martin, Johnny Mercer, Sunit Singh, “Imperialism and the Left,” *Platypus Review* 129 (September 2020), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2020/09/01/imperialism-and-the-left-2/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Chris Cutrone, “Lenin today,” *Platypus Review* 126 (May 2020), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2020/05/01/lenin-today/>.

¹¹ Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2013).

“The anti-war movement,” continued from page 1

were communists who an international Left saw as its own. In the 00s, this narrative did not hold. Both Saddam and the Taliban murdered communists, but the line at the time was that terrorists are the new communists.

That was the Platypus point of departure.

In a way the problem I considered as a teenager was a far-sighted problem — how can we best organize the standing anti-war movement? We don’t have that problem now. Perhaps, this is because the concept of an “anti-war movement” is itself part of the problem, not just the politics of the anti-war movement.

The mass of the Left generally welcomed the war because it gave it something simple to say. Of course we are against imperialism because imperialism is bad and this is a war for oil. Can we imagine chanting “no blood for oil” now?

The Iraq War was seemingly clarifying for the Left but that belied a deeper confusion that Platypus was founded to expose.

The anti-war movement could draw on a ready-made theory and a ready-made practice. They invoked Lenin’s critique of imperialism and called for mass protest. It’s in this way that the Left loves war: it gives them something to say. Or, it did.

The Ukraine War is different. In Ukraine, since an enemy of the U.S. invaded another country, the Left has nothing to say. The dominant liberal opinion now is on the side of the war. Now Putin seems like the fascist (of course everyone thinks everyone else is a fascist and a Nazi), and Trump is thought to be his ally, and so Trump is the fascist, and that would make Bush, by comparison, a defender of democracy.

The legacy that now maybe seems more apt is unfortunately that of the 30s and 40s with Franco and the Nazis. There, the Left was basically pro-war. The Left today accepts that there were two good wars in American history: the Civil War and the Second World War. At one point the Left would also have defended the Revolutionary War, but no longer. The opposition to the Second World War was much more within currents on the Right than on the Left. The wars against Franco and the Nazis were good wars because they were anti-fascist. The War in Ukraine marks a shift on the Left from basically anti-imperialist politics in the mid-00s to basically anti-fascist politics today. This is connected and maybe more at the heart of the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America and the collapse of the International Socialist Organization. The anti-imperialist Left was more militantly anti-war and supported counterweights to American hegemony. The Anti-fascist Left saw the counter-American regional hegemons as dangerous and also was more sympathetic with pro-state politics domestically.

One can’t just assume that the Left would necessarily have an anti-war position.

Is the issue the politics of the anti-war movement, or is the problem the conception of an anti-war movement in the first place?

To recap: the antiwar movement of the 00s was seemingly clarifying for the Left because it gave them a theory and an activity, but this belied a deeper confusion. The non-existence of an anti-war movement today is more directly confusing: it speaks to both historical repetition with the further evacuation of Left politics.

The Spartacist League had a line: the Bolsheviks were the only successful anti-war movement.⁴ The Bolsheviks were against the war, but their conception of how to end the war was based upon a much larger political program than just opposition to the war. Pure opposition to the war is just resistance politics — resisting the war machine. Of course, I want there to be an anti-war movement. But would it be adequate? No. The problem with the concept of an anti-war movement is that it is foundationally opposing a symptom. Lenin and the Bolsheviks understood themselves as addressing a deeper cause. Regardless of whether you oppose or support intervention in support of Ukraine or the Russian invasion — there is no deeper cause that we are addressing. What is our world historic mission? That’s what the Left would need to ask itself first. **IP**

¹ Many of the ideas in this talk emerged in conversation with Richard Rubin.

² Students for a Democratic Society. See, for instance, “Rebels with a Cause,” available at <<https://youtu.be/IRoJoflUH4k>>.

³ The transcript of which can be found in *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2010/07/09/imperialism-what-is-it-why-should-we-be-against-it/>>.

⁴ “U.S. Out of Iraq Now! The Left and the Occupation: For Class Struggle Against U.S. Capitalist Rulers!,” *Workers Vanguard* 850 (June 10, 2005), available online at <<https://spartacist.org/english/wv/850/left.html>>.

“Psychoanalysis and Marxism,” continued from page 2

The problematic of the contradiction was diverted either psychologically or sociologically: pushed back into the individual as in Klein, or out into society with Horney and Fromm. What both extremes shared was one-sidedly resolving a tension between subject and object which was not resolved in Freud or Marx; one which, according to them, could not be resolved theoretically. For Adorno, this attempt would cause violence to theory, humanity, and reality itself.

In revised psychoanalysis, the tension between individual and society was simply severed theoretically. The two stand opposite each other as unmediated antipodes. Maybe the most important lesson Adorno took from Marxism, and its failure, was that if concepts like subject and object, man and world, mankind and history, proletariat and capitalism, party and class, belonged together, it was only in their nonidentity. Because if one were to change the other, and therefore both were to mutually change themselves, they must be differentiated but held in relation, and not ontologically eternalized as separate. This thought figures in Freud’s theory, but in that of none of the psychoanalytic revisionists — they renaturalized the psyche. What appeared for centuries as God-given

or “natural” to humans was drawn by Freud into the glare of the Enlightenment. Adorno, who recognized that psychoanalysis had itself become mass deception, enlisted himself, in his own way, to Freud’s dictum: “where id was, ego should be.”

Adorno recognized in this sentence a last stirring of hope: where now only anti-capitalist discontent reigns, there theoretically could and should again be the development of consciousness: class consciousness, which would be the consciousness of the history of mankind.

Part two

In the 1950s and 60s, the process of integrating psychoanalysis on a larger social scale continued. So-called “focus groups,” in which randomly selected target groups of consumers were invited to participate in free-association exercises about their impressions of products, became widespread, especially in the American mass production of consumer goods.⁷ Public and private advertisers utilized these insights into the libidinous drive structure of the masses for more targeted manipulation and control strategies. Additionally, within psychoanalytic practice itself, the so-called neo-Freudians increasingly blurred the fine line between therapy aimed at bettering the individual through strengthening the reality principle of the ego, and therapy directed at adapting to a bad social reality.⁸

Psychoanalysis experienced an unprecedented social expansion in the decades following World War II, after the bourgeois scientific establishment had vehemently opposed it in the late 19th century. However, this came at a cost. In the early 50s, Adorno criticized the neo-Freudians and their “revisionist” psychoanalysis. Like all radical bourgeois thinkers, Freud left unresolved the contradictions between consciousness and the unconscious, individual and society, and ego and id. However, in the hands of the revisionists, psychoanalysis gradually transformed into a tool that integrated psychic impulses into the social status quo, cultivating adaptation instead of emancipation.⁹

First, I would like to talk about another critic of the Freudian revisionist school who probably influenced the Left in subsequent decades more significantly than Adorno: the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

With the crisis of Stalinism and the emergence of the so-called New Left in the second half of the 50s, many Leftists became increasingly interested in psychoanalytic theory. With the disintegration and degeneration of radical student associations, such as the Socialist German Student League or the Students for a Democratic Society in America at the end of the 60s, this interest, or rather, the interest in a particular interpretation of psychoanalysis reached a new peak. It was the interpretation of Jacques Lacan.¹⁰ Although Lacan neither wanted his theories to be associated with specific Leftist movements nor made explicit political claims, they influenced numerous “Leftist” political theorists in the following decades, ranging from Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, and Cornelius Castoriadis to Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. Yannis Stavrakakis, political scientist and professor of political theory and discourse analysis, refers to this group as the “Lacanian Left.”¹¹ So what is it about Lacan’s theories that so many different thinkers on the Left seek to make productive? As mentioned previously, these are theories which, being interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis, do not claim to be affiliated with any kind of Left-wing politics. Is Lacanian Leftism really a “re-politicization” of psychoanalysis that has arrived in the center of society? To address these questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at a few of Lacan’s basic ideas.

One of Lacan’s essential and frequently recurring motifs is that the unconscious is structured like a language.¹² He thus builds on foundational assumptions of structuralism, an intellectual movement that peaked in the 60s and 70s. A basic tenet of structuralism is the idea that objects can never be understood in isolation, but only through their position and connection to others, as part of a whole, system, or structure. Accordingly, knowing an object only becomes possible through recognizing its meaning as a sign within a certain structure, whereby language serves as the central paradigm. For structuralism, language, understood as a system of signs or symbols, becomes the fundamental model for explaining reality.

Lacan radicalized these basic assumptions of structuralism by assuming that the whole — the system or structure — from which the sign’s meaning may arise, is itself incomplete. Language can thus never generate a closed system, or a self-contained context of meaning, but is characterized by a lack.¹³ Language as a structure — an ensemble that creates meaning — remains incomplete. Consequently, the meaning of symbols also never fully captures what they symbolize. For Lacan, the split between conscious and unconscious psychic life is marked by a fundamental non-identity between the social symbols, the signifiers of our reality, and this reality itself, which Lacan calls the “Real.” Moreover, this gap between the signifier and the signified is constitutive. The acquisition of language, the coupling of words with things, therefore, also gives rise to an incapacity: the incapacity to grasp what the word actually stands for. Thus, according to Lacan, the origin of the unconscious lies in the acquisition of language. The subject’s psychological individuation process — that is, the development of the infant’s or toddler’s personality — is, therefore, a necessary alienation, the inevitable splitting of the psychic life into conscious and unconscious parts. Language serves as a coping mechanism to help deal with the father’s intrusion into the mother-child relationship.¹⁴ In other words, it always primarily serves to invoke the absence of a libidinally cathected person. This raises the question if, for Lacan, the alienating function of language is an expression of the Oedipus complex within the nuclear family’s social organization, or if it describes the unchanging nature of human psychic life independent of social factors.

The essential basic assumption is that the object of desire is always already lost. However, its always-already-lostness is constitutive; that is to say, it is the very root of all human activity and drive. We never get what is promised to us and what we expect from others.

It is, in fact, impossible for us to get it. This hypostasized impossibility keeps our desires and activities, as well as history itself, alive.¹⁵ Herein lies the ontologization of the “nature” of desire, that is, Lacan’s rigid fixation of the essence of the human’s unconscious drive structures.

For Freud, however, the symptoms which express unconscious desires and impulses [dreams, so-called slips, or neuroses] were part of an economy. That means repression or general symptoms are always expressions of an attempt to comply with and escape from censorship at the same time.¹⁶ This dynamic of an economic conception of human drives makes it possible to understand censorship as mediated by society. Accordingly, that which may become the content of a person’s consciousness can enter into a different relationship with societal norms and, in the broadest sense, society’s material organization, rather than appearing as predetermined by nature — thus ontology. Lacan answers quite clearly what this means for the question of social progress: “there is no such thing as progress. Everything one gains on one side, one loses on the other.”¹⁷

In Lacan’s work, the tension — the nonidentity of subject and object — turns into an insurmountable negative ontology without a sense of and connection to what ought to be.

Where does this leave the so-called Lacanian Left? I would like to say a few words about Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis was a co-founder of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie and its eponymous journal, which had considerable significance for the New Left, especially in France. At the same time, he was one of the first well-known Leftist theorists to engage with Lacan as early as the early 1960s. Although Castoriadis eventually broke with parts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, they are very similar in their basic assumptions. Both assume that not merely our reality, but also the subject itself — or the basic categories in which we perceive ourselves — are socially constructed. This socially constructed sphere of meaning is opposed by a pre-social nature that limits and resists the social capacity to generate meaning. It remains outside the fundamental discourse that establishes what we call reality. The similarity to what Lacan calls the distinction between reality and the Real is unmistakable. Moreover, the nature of the interaction between these two different spheres is virtually identical. The socially constructed reality and the Real or the pre-social nature are incommensurable with one another; there is an insurmountable gulf between them. Although both thinkers draw different conclusions from this view, their ontological apparatus remains the same.

For Slavoj Žižek, arguably one of today’s most popular critics of capitalism, the negative ontology of Lacanian psychoanalysis is an indispensable cornerstone. According to Žižek, the possibility of a radical reordering of the Symbolic, that is, of the sociopolitical institution of society as a whole, arises through an “authentic act.” This act becomes possible when there is an intervention of the Real.¹⁸ The Real, as defined by Lacan, constitutes a sphere distinct from the Symbolic, which represents the ineffable, the unconscious. This means that what is supposed to be expressed by means of language can never be completely absorbed by it. However, the notion of the insurmountable gulf between the order of the Symbolic and the Real, borrowed from Lacan, remains a prerequisite. We have to sacrifice the Real as a price, so to speak, to gain access to the Symbolic order, that is, to the socially constructed reality.

The question arises why it was the interpretation of psychoanalysis by Lacan, who never considered himself part of the Left, let alone Marxism, that influenced so many thinkers on the Left during his time and in the following decades. Whence the underlying attempt to politicize Lacan’s interpretation of psychoanalysis, which made no serious attempt to be political? Why insist on utilizing the constitutively deficient Lacanian subject for the transformation of society?

Perhaps Lacan’s interpretation is an attempt to respond to a more fundamental problem facing psychoanalysis in the late capitalist, administered world: the depersonalization of the primordial images that guide the development of the superego.¹⁹ Marcuse describes this in *Eros and Civilization* as follows:

Formerly the superego was “fed” by the master, the chief, the principal. These represented the reality principle in their tangible personality: harsh and benevolent, cruel and rewarding, they provoked and punished the desire to revolt; the enforcement of conformity was their personal function and responsibility. . . . But these personal father-images have gradually disappeared behind the institutions. With the rationalization of the productive apparatus, with the multiplication of functions, all domination assumes the form of administration. . . . The sadistic principals, the capitalist exploiters, have been transformed into salaried members of a bureaucracy, whom their subjects meet as members of another bureaucracy. The pain, frustration, impotence of the individual derive from a highly productive and efficiently functioning system in which he makes a better living than ever before. Responsibility for the organization of his life lies with the whole, the “system,” the sum total of the institutions that determine, satisfy, and control his needs.²⁰

One can see: reinterpreting this system described by Marcuse in terms of Lacanian negative ontology is perhaps not all too great of a leap. In its essence,

however, it is concerned with the whole.

To conclude, I would like to return to Lacan.

Stravakakis quotes him:

“Why couldn’t the family, society itself, be creations built from repression? They’re nothing less” The unconscious ex-sists, is motivated by the structure, by language, and in that sense repression and the superego (logically) pre-exist their crystallisation in “discontents [symptom] in civilization” For this reason, to attribute the lack of [total] enjoyment to “bad societal arrangements” can only be described as foolish.²¹

Lacan thus explicitly assumes that the repressive agency logically precedes the symptoms that it produces in the respective institution of society, and even suggests that it exists completely independently of social order. Thus, the unconscious dynamics of human drives that Freud describes as an expression of the entanglement between individual and society becomes an ontology that lies outside society, for Lacan, a doctrine of being or non-being.

Let us contrast this with a remarkable quote by Freud from his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*: “The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one; since it does not possess enough provisions to keep its members alive unless they work, it must restrict the number of its members and divert their energies from sexual activity to work. It is faced, in short, by the eternal, primeval exigencies of life, which are with us to this day.”²² One notes that precisely these eternal, primeval exigencies of life which continue in the present — the development of culture as a constant denial of the full satisfaction of needs — are, according to Freud, ultimately an economic problem, and not the product of a linguistically constructed reality. Finally, although Freud also thought that culture as such is not possible without oppression, “he upholds the tabooed aspirations of humanity: the claim for a state where freedom and necessity coincide.”²³ For Adorno, the Frankfurt School, and the best Marxists before them, the fundamental historical framework of this problem of freedom concerned the problem of capital.²⁴ The contradictions Freud uncovered within the psychic life of bourgeois individuals thus appear as inseparable from and bound to the historical-Marxist conception of capitalism: as a crisis and contradiction of bourgeois society itself. A society that “with its senile lunatic form, is thematic in a phase in which control over others’ labor continues, even though humanity no longer needs it for its self-preservation.”²⁵ Today we are faced with the legacy of this defeated and utterly failed tradition, the critical core of which was the struggle for a new society in which its individuals could be themselves for the first time.²⁶ The Left is dead! Long live the Left! **IP**

¹ Leon Trotsky, “Culture and Socialism” (1927), republished at *World Socialist Web Site*, October 23, 2008, available at <<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/cult-o23.html>>.

² Victor Cova, “On the Marxist use of psychoanalysis to understand fascism,” *Platypus Review* 140 (October 2021), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2021/10/01/on-the-marxist-use-of-psychoanalysis-to-understand-fascism/>>.

³ More commonly translated into English as “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.”

⁴ German Foreign Minister, 1998–2005.

⁵ Wilhelm Reich, *People in Trouble* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 136.

⁶ Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971), 221.

⁷ See Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self, Part 3: There is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads; He Must be Destroyed* [2002], available online at <<https://youtu.be/ub2LB2MaGoM>>.

⁸ See Chris Cutrone, “Adorno and Freud,” *Platypus Review* 24 (June 2010), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2010/06/10/adorno-and-freud/>>.

⁹ See T. W. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” trans. Nan-Nan Lee, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014): 326–38.

¹⁰ See Andrew Collier, “Lacan, psychoanalysis and the left,” *International Socialism* 2, no. 7 (Winter 1980): 51–71, available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/eto/newspaper/isj2/1980/no2-007/collier.html>>.

¹¹ See Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

¹² Collier, “Lacan, psychoanalysis and the left.”

¹³ Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 39.

¹⁴ Collier, “Lacan, psychoanalysis and the left.”

¹⁵ Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 47.

¹⁶ Collier, “Lacan, psychoanalysis and the left.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 112.

¹⁹ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 99.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 28.

²² Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVI (London: Vintage, 1999), 312.

²³ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 19.

²⁴ Cutrone, “Adorno and Freud.”

²⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 250.

²⁶ Cutrone, “Adorno and Freud.”



Psychoanalysis and Marxism

Stefan Hain and Andreas Wintersperger

On January 22, 2021, *Platypus Affiliated Society* members Stefan Hain and Andreas Wintersperger gave the teach-in “*Psychoanalyse und Marxismus*” during the second German-speaking *Platypus Affiliated Society* Conference, the video of which is available at <<https://youtu.be/sNsU1xVWEsQ>>. It has been translated into English by Leonie Ettinger and Tamas Vilaghy.

Part one
SINCE PLATYPUS IS A PROJECT primarily concerned with the question of Marxism and the Left, other questions lay close at hand: what is psychoanalysis? Why should the Left take interest in it? What is the historical relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism?

Psychology as an independent discipline developed in the 19th century. It concerned itself with the physical and biological foundations of psychological apperception, “introducing the content of consciousness into the sphere of study” — but also as *Völkerpsychologie*, often translated as cultural or ethnic psychology, with separate foundations for each cultural group.

Freud was the first, however, to offer a natural-scientific conception of the unconscious, a concept previously reserved for art and philosophy. In the course of his medical work, he came to the recognition that the mind could not be immaterial, or essentially independent of the body. He examined how freedom and subjectivity were both generated and inhibited in concrete forms by a mental division running through people. For Freud, the psyche was the connection between body and spirit. It was founded upon two basic driving forces: Eros, which aims to unite and expand life, carrying it to higher complexity; opposed to Thanatos (from the late Freud), the death drive which determines life as finite.

These two fundamental drives represent real abstractions for Freud, which never present themselves independently of a given form. Drives are psychical representations of the biological nature of mankind: originating in, but also proceeding beyond it. Psychology and consciousness, according to Freud, would never be explained through either biology or philosophy. The psyche was itself mediated.

Freud’s science of the unconscious was thus intentionally oriented in a different direction than, for example, the behavioral research of Ivan Pavlov: Freud wanted to consciously formulate a natural science of human beings as modern individuals. He hoped to detect the bases of consciousness in myth, art, and everyday phenomena, whereas Pavlov’s research objects mentioned above were glands, nerves, and reflexes. Freud wanted to formulate more than just another therapy, clinical application, or medical theory through his work. He saw his theory, after those of Copernicus and Darwin, as “the third affront to humanity”: scientific proof that “man was not the master of his own house.” Freud understood his theory, without having any such intentions, as the last form of radical bourgeois self-critique. Radical, in going to the root of things: sexuality as the source of life and interpersonal relations. In the words of Chris Cutrone, Freud did not formulate a sexual theory of neurosis, but a neurotic theory of sexuality. He kept the basis of society in sight: the constraint and suppression of the basic desires of its members was the foundation of all previous society. Freud de-naturalized the foundations of bourgeois society: the status quo was not the natural ideal condition of man, but rather the product of culture, phylogenesis, and ontogenesis (i.e., both the historical development of the species and individuals’ development within this process). The concept of the self-determining bourgeois subject, insofar as it remained part of the history of man’s repression, also remained a surface phenomenon. It was not wrong, but rather did not capture what was essential to mankind and its culture. “Cultural discontents” were rationally grounded for Freud, a symptom of immemorial repression. The human mind resisted with the force of a raging beast when this repression was explained as socially necessary.

This led, says Freud, to the disintegration of the mind, and to the formation of a psychic apparatus with components opposed to each other: the id, the representative of the drives; the superego, the internalization of cultural commandments and prohibitions; and lastly the ego in the dreary middle, the I whose task it is to mediate between both these tyrants and the exigencies of the outside world. Freud presented this situation as essentially inharmonious — but also as a product of history. In their present form the drives promise no absolute freedom, no guaranteed happiness, and no resolution to contradiction. One can take this as a deep philosophical pessimism, or alternatively as a parallel to Marx and Engels’s critique of history, where freedom, at its core, always meant the domination of man.

For Freud, and later Marcuse, a hope for the fate of the drives (*Triebchicksal*) lay in their *polymorphous-perverse*, or manifoldly deviant, character. Their nature was such that neither their aim nor form could be fixed. The basis for the strangest and most painful deviations of the human mind also formed, in their essence, the potential to change bad norms. Freud recognized, like Marx, that in the catastrophe of humanity lay hidden the fragments of liberation.

Freud’s combination of scientific accuracy and cultural understanding quickly transformed psychoanalysis into an unforeseen potential for social control and organization. Freud himself recognized,

not without fear, what it meant that society continued to centralize and concentrate in capitalism: the organization of soldiers in the First World War directed him not only, at first, to the concept of the death drive, but also to the question of which mental mechanisms lay at the basis of mass cultural formation. Freud recognized the authority-seeking mass forms of capitalism as the natural / unnatural counterpart to the neurotic isolation of individuals. Maybe the most interesting encounter between psychoanalysis and Marxism took place at the end of the 1920s over the question of masses and politics. But first one step back.

The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky learned of psychoanalysis in Vienna through a close colleague who was being treated by Alfred Adler. The socialist Adler, a former student of Freud’s who disavowed this connection, had begun to develop his own “individual psychology” around 1911. He was perhaps the first “revisionist” of psychoanalysis.

With an ironic nod to Freud, Adler postulated a primary “aggression drive.” Freud’s later discovery of Thanatos appeared to confirm Adler’s theory, although Freud insisted that his death drive was something qualitatively different, with aggression being a secondary phenomenon. Freud was skeptical, if not opposed, to socialism. Adler came into contact with revolutionary Russian politics through his wife Raissa, and knew the writings of Trotsky before the latter met him. We will discuss Adler again later on.

Trotsky himself saw psychoanalysis not only as one of the most advanced areas of human culture and productive capacity, but also thought that Marxism and psychoanalysis had more in common than perhaps Marxists cared to admit. Isaac Deutscher wrote in his biography of Trotsky that up until he was murdered, Trotsky had “been studying psychoanalytic problems deeply and systematically.”

In 1927, three months before he would be kicked out of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Stalin’s orders, Trotsky wrote in “Culture and Socialism” about the cultural significance of psychology, for example. In his view, Pavlov’s science of reflexes proceeded according to the methods of dialectical materialism, and showed how it arrived at an awareness of reflexes. With each step, Pavlov remained experimental and scientific. Trotsky continued:

The school of the Viennese psychoanalyst Freud takes a different approach to the problem. It assumes in advance that the driving force behind the most complex and refined psychic processes is physiological need. In this general sense it is materialistic, if we leave aside the question of whether or not it places too much emphasis on the sexual element at the expense of others, for this is already a debate within the confines of materialism. But the psychoanalyst doesn’t approach the problem of consciousness experimentally, from lower phenomena to higher, or from simple reflex to complex; he tries to take all these intermediate steps with a single bound, going from the top down, from religious myth, lyrical poem or dream — straight to the physiological foundation of the psyche.

Idealists teach that the psyche is independent, and that the “soul” is a bottomless well. Both Pavlov and Freud consider physiology to be the bottom of the “soul.” But Pavlov, like a diver, descends to the bottom and painstakingly investigates the well from the bottom up. Freud, on the other hand, stands above the well, and with a penetrating stare tries to capture or guess the outlines of the bottom through the turpid, ever-changing surface of the water. Pavlov’s method is the experiment, while Freud’s is conjecture, sometimes fantastic supposition. The attempt to declare psychoanalysis “incompatible” with Marxism, and to simply turn one’s back on Freudianism is too simple, or more precisely, simplistic. But in no case are we obliged to adopt Freudianism. It is a working hypothesis which allows for deductions and conjectures within the frame of materialist psychology. The validity of the suppositions will be proven in due time through experiments. We have neither the grounds nor the right to impose a ban on the psychoanalytic path. Even if it is less certain, it still tries to anticipate the conclusions that will be reached more slowly by the experimental path.¹

In the same month that Trotsky published “Culture and Socialism,” another student of Freud’s, the 30-year-old Wilhelm Reich, became politicized through the July Revolt in Vienna in which 84 workers were shot dead, and 600 wounded. Reich, whose area of specialty was sexology, joined the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) in 1928. Victor Cova of *Platypus* recently led a teach-in on Reich’s critique of fascism which I would recommend to anyone interested. The following excerpt provides a short summary of Reich’s efforts to connect Marxism and psychoanalysis:

For Reich, it is the disintegration of the Marxist party from 1914 onwards which makes it both possible and necessary to rely on Freudian concepts; primarily to understand the workers’ authoritarian personality structure which led to that disintegration in the first place. Yet such a use of Freudian concepts should have led, properly, to a rediscovery of orthodox Marxism, not to its replacement or complementation with a heterogeneous theory.²

Reich’s scientific object, the sexuality of individuals and the subjectivity of masses, was thus in no way freely chosen. It was consequent to the Marxist party’s crisis and disintegration in the catastrophe of the First World War. The masses did not disappear after the war,

but transformed into another social form, and since in the Soviet Union this phenomenon came to mean collectivization, the solution had to look different in the open capitalist countries. The appropriate instrument was found in Freud’s psychoanalysis.

In his documentary series *The Century of the Self*, filmmaker Adam Curtis lets Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, have his say. Bernays, who was a psychological adviser to Woodrow Wilson after the war in Europe, found an unexpected niche for analysis in the early 1920s: as the theoretical basis for marketing luxury articles. Ads should no longer aim to advertise a product, but the feeling which the acquisition of the article promised — often freedom and the absence of constraint. Bernays soon saw that what was possible with material products must be possible with ideas as well: advertisements as propaganda. Bernays’s rationale was so simple, it was genius: “If man can use propaganda for war, he can certainly use it for peace.”

Bernays was a democratic prelude to totalitarian catastrophe: even before Goebbels and other fascists could make use of psychoanalytic foundations for their propaganda, Bernays came to these ideas in a democratic framework, which he called “the engineering of consent.” It was these tendencies to which Herbert Marcuse referred in his 1955 work, *Eros and Civilization*: “Our epoch tends to be totalitarian, even in those places where a totalitarian state has not developed.”

Bernays’s daughter Ann states in the documentary that “democracy was a wonderful concept for my father, but I don’t think he felt that people have reliable judgment. They can easily vote for the wrong person, or want the wrong things, and because of this, they have to be led.”

Freud also began asking himself, what motivated the seeming liquidation of the individual in mass society, and what did this mean? His mass psychology grew out of the critique of contemporary concepts via the drive-based psychical structure of individuals. In “Mass Psychology and Ego-Analysis” (1921),³ Freud explained in almost dialectical terms how people, driven by libidinal demands that could not be handled within the individual, purposefully albeit half-consciously shed part of their individuality. The organized mass was not a spontaneous natural phenomenon but a product of society, a half-conscious social form to satisfy the desires of deeply suffering and unfree individuals. The mass of individuals relinquished their individuality to some sort of leader, be it an idea or a person; Freud used the army and the church as examples of organized masses. As a mass coalesced, it became unified for an imagined Other: a figure who knows what’s going on, and what to do. All that it desired was devotion to the common principle. This relieved the tension from authority-driven, inner-drive conflicts in the short term, and let the individual become something else without requiring the individual to essentially change themself. Mass psychology is ego psychology.

The young intellectuals who came across Marxism in the 1920s encountered a different world than Trotsky, a radical of the pre-war Social Democracy. Their world was deeply shaped by the failure of the world revolution and the splintering of the workers’ movement and its parties. The social essence of the masses was constitutively and irreversibly changed. When psychoanalysis does not serve the revolution, it serves the counterrevolution.

In 1930 Wilhelm Reich traveled from Vienna to Berlin, where he joined the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). There was already another young psychologist from Vienna living there: Manès Sperber, who had interrupted his *Abitur* exams to become Alfred Adler’s personal assistant. Sperber, eight years younger than Reich, was politicized in “Red Vienna” as an adolescent, and sent to Berlin by Adler as the ambassador of individual psychology in 1927, where he also joined the KPD within the same year. With Adler’s daughter Valentina, who had already joined the party in 1921, he worked in the local group for individual psychology. While Reich continued his work at the “orthodox” Freudian Institute for Psychoanalysis, engaging with the likes of Karen Horney and Erich Fromm in Marxist working groups, Sperber remained a convinced follower of Adler’s theories. Sperber taught in the Marxist workers’ schools, hoping to formulate a Marxist individual psychology which “would strengthen people in their feelings of self-worth and sociability, and comprehend them in their social connections instead of the fluctuations of their drives [*Triebchicksal*] — paying attention to tomorrow, not yesterday.” Despite being neighbors in Wilmersdorf, members of the same party, and hence sharing a common political goal, each psychologist would maintain that his theory was irreconcilable with the other’s. The Stalinist tragedy would unite them in the end, but only as dissenters and renegades, as the following years would entail the death of psychoanalysis in the workers’ movement and the communist parties.

Reich was kicked out of the KPD during the rise of National Socialism as a “pornographer” — not least because his theory of orgasmic disorder in the party masses was met with little comprehension. Sperber broke with Adler over the question of revolution. Reich wrote Trotsky from his exile, although the two men never met. In the course of his life Reich retreated more and more into esoteric sexual theories. Ending up in the U.S. after his flight from fascism, Reich was followed by the FBI, his books were burned, and he ended up dying in prison in 1957.

Like Adler’s daughter Valentina, Sperber became an agent of the Comintern. His thousand-page novel *Like a Tear in the Ocean* speaks of the horrors of Stalinism in which Sperber himself participated. In the course of the 1937 show trials, in which the last surviving participants of the October Revolution were physically and socially liquidated, he broke with official Communism for good. Valentina Adler and her husband, not least because of the family’s friendship with Trotsky, also fell victim to Party “cleansing” and died in internment camps. Sperber’s nonetheless Leftist anti-communism would eventually be popularized by the heroes of the New

Left in their long march through the institutions: Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Joschka Fischer,⁴ and Wolf Biermann were fascinated by this dissenter. It bothered them very little that Sperber himself saw the New Left as spoiled, adventurous, and unpolitical.

What did it mean that the Party was unwilling or incapable of using the energy of its young leaders to hinder National Socialism? And where could one formulate theory, if not in the Party? These questions from 1923–24 led to the foundation of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Erich Fromm, already mentioned above, came to the Institute in 1930. Under the direction of Max Horkheimer, Fromm contributed to the work of the Institute with the first psychoanalytically-grounded theories on characterology, social psychology, and authority. Unlike Wilhelm Reich, Fromm lay very little emphasis on sexuality. Even in 1930, according to Reich, Fromm’s work was characterized “neither by sexual-economic questions, nor with contemporary political connections. In a detailed conversation from that time, Fromm accepted my sexual-political interpretation. It became clear to him that only the [concept of] sexual energy was adequate to the clarification of mass-psychological dynamics.”⁵

What Fromm learned from Reich’s psychoanalytic Marxism remains as unclear as history itself, whose true image “flits by.” Reich later came to wonder how Fromm,

in his publications on authority and the family, the fear of freedom, etc., would completely suppress the sexual life of masses, its connection to the fear of freedom, and the desire for authority. I could never comprehend this, as I had no reason to doubt Fromm’s fundamental sincerity. But the denial of sexuality in social and private life displays some tricks which are inaccessible to rational comprehension.⁶

This point by Reich hits upon the central critique formulated by Theodor Adorno towards the work of his colleague Fromm: “He treats the concept of authority too lightly, without which we really can’t grasp either Lenin’s avant-garde or the dictatorship. I’ll urge him to read Lenin,” he wrote to Horkheimer in 1936. Fromm proceeded with his critique that Freud had handled his patients with insufficient love. An ethical and humanistic psychoanalysis was needed to bring out mankind’s true cooperative, peaceful, and healthy nature. Adorno saw here the danger of psychoanalysis being deprived of its deepest source of strength: sexuality, which constituted the critical core of psychoanalysis in the form of the drive theory. For only through psychoanalysis would the contradiction which lay in the origins of human subjectivity be expressed: that the freedoms of society grew out of the restriction of the [sexual] freedom of individuals. From the beginning of civilization, to be human has meant needing to suppress and taboo what is human in oneself and others. Like Reich, Adorno worried that Fromm condemned authority without recognizing how deeply it was already entangled in freedom. This was no philosophical question, but one upon which all of the central political questions which Lenin and Trotsky attempted to radically realize depended. The First World War, the self-destructive betrayal of Marxist social democracy, indeed became the last time that Lenin, Trotsky, or their comrade Luxemburg saw the opportunity for a proletarian social revolution. How should Marxism, whose political core was the self-emancipation of the working class, now get around the fact that the masses let themselves be led into servitude and annihilation without a fight? These questions entered into Adorno’s work through psychoanalytic terminology, most prominently in *The Authoritarian Personality* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

For Adorno, the contradiction which found expression in Freud’s orthodox psychoanalysis and in orthodox Marxism existed *in the world*. Only when the unfreedom and barbarism of civilization was fully perceived could it be revolutionized in freedom.

This contradiction was not propaganda, but real; it could only be overcome by enduring it — and not by leaping over it. Lenin and Freud would have to be taken up in their full ambivalence, not blunted as an adaptation. For Adorno, this was also true for the relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism: the potential (*Spannungsverhältnis*) of either theory could only grow out of their nonidentity. The desire to force upon them a synthesis in order to liquidate their differences, according to Adorno, was a reconciliation through blackmail.

“Nothing is true in psychoanalysis except its exaggerations,” he wrote in *Minima Moralia*.

Fromm and the Institute quietly parted ways at the end of the 30s.

Psychoanalysis achieved notable public acceptance in the U.S. in the 1950s. It entered into the pages of women’s magazines, self-help books, and Hollywood scripts. Before using LSD to explore his individuality, Cary Grant underwent analysis. A crisis in behavioral psychology gave further credence to psychoanalysis’s claim to the basic concepts of clinical psychotherapy. While Fromm went on writing quasi-theological self-help books, Karen Horney rose to prominence, along with her colleague from her time in Berlin, Melanie Klein, as one of the leading figures of the psychoanalysts who had broken with Freud. Like his erstwhile colleague and partner Horney, Fromm longed for a more loving form of psychoanalysis, more focused on social circumstances. They thereby formulated concepts which bear a strong resemblance to the social-democratic individual psychology of Adler. The drives, the libido, and the Oedipus complex disappeared; the superego became conceptualized as a pathological expression, not as a norm. According to their nature, people were healthy, happy, and complete in themselves. It was only external social pressures which interfered with the actually functional ego.

This meant nothing less than the “revision” of psychoanalysis for Adorno — an allusion to the revisionist dispute within the Second International. Just as then the Marxist theory of the political crisis of capitalism was made to disappear, so here sexuality.